

Analyzing Ohio State University's Food Purchasing System: Opportunities for  
Change through the Real Food Challenge

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## **Abstract**

Students at Ohio State University (OSU) seek to achieve a university commitment to the Real Food Challenge (RFC), a national student movement that seeks to effect change in the food system through colleges and universities. In order to assess the likelihood of a commitment by OSU, and the efficacy of this strategy for forwarding alternative food movement goals, this study explores barriers to and opportunities for adoption of the RFC commitment through a diffusion of innovations framework. First, I examine characteristics common among institutions that have adopted the commitment and compare these institutional characteristics with OSU to identify possible structural barriers to adoption. I then illustrate a map of how OSU's food purchasing system is organized by conducting secondary analysis of web data, solicitations of information, and ongoing campaign work through RFC, identifying and analyzing critical decision-making nodes. Strategy suggestions are offered for students in response to barriers and opportunities revealed, while questions regarding the efficacy of RFC as a strategy to forward alternative food system goals at OSU and further research questions are raised.

## Introduction

In recent years, growing interest in lessening the environmental and social impacts of United States agriculture has led to the emergence of many threads of an overarching alternative food movement. Within this movement, institutions that purchase large quantities of food, such as hospitals and schools, have been targeted as crucial actors for driving change due to their sizable purchasing power (Friedmann 2007). Student activism strives to foment this change at colleges and universities throughout the U.S., increasingly channeling this activity through the Real Food Challenge (RFC), a national student organization through which colleges and universities make a commitment to improve their impact on the food system (Real Food Challenge n.d.). To date, 30 institutions have signed the Real Food Campus Commitment (hereafter referred to as the commitment) nationally, the 23-school California State University has made a system wide commitment, and campaigns are active and ongoing at about 50 more institutions (Real Food Challenge). Students at OSU are seeking to achieve a university commitment to RFC. In order to assess the likelihood and feasibility of a commitment by OSU and the efficacy of this strategy for progressing food systems change, this study analyzes RFC through a diffusion of innovations framework, and explores barriers to and opportunities for adoption of the commitment at OSU by examining characteristics common among prior institutional adopters, and delineation of food purchasing structures at OSU to identify and evaluate critical decision-making nodes.

Food regime theory, first introduced by Harriett Friedmann in 1987, seeks to explain the role of food and agriculture in the construction of global capitalism (McMichael 2009). Some theorists currently argue we are operating in the midst of a corporate food regime: characterized by corporate hegemony and economic liberalism, and expressed through the consolidation of

transnational corporations across the supply chain (McMichael 2009). The corporate food regime can also be understood as the expression of the current relationship between capital, nation, and state, as has been described by political economist Kojin Karatani (2008). According to Karatani, global capitalism is defined by and expressed through this relationship, where capital is the arena in which class interests are defined, nation can be understood as communities of people, and the state can be understood as the sovereign government (2008). In the corporate food regime, the state is occupied by the interests of transnational capital, and alternative food system actors seek to mobilize the nation in order to redefine the class interests represented by the state. Real Food Challenge is one such alternative food system movement initiative, seeking to mobilize the national community of students to redefine the class interests of the food system currently represented by universities, which, through their funding and governance structures could be construed as one expression of the state. Placing RFC as a challenge to the corporate food regime allows for a deeper understanding of the extent to which this sort of movement action may contribute to broader food system goals that seek to challenge the underpinnings of the corporate food regime.

Social movement theorists have explored food movement goals through a variety of lenses, using varying terminology to assess the degree to which different movement actors are capable of transforming the food system and of challenging the corporate food regime (Barlett 2011, Holt Giménez and Shattuck 2011). In Barlett's 2011 *Campus Sustainable Food Projects: Critique and Engagement*, she questions whether campus food projects, including RFC, have the potential to transform the food system. Similarly, Holt Giménez and Shattuck's 2011 work, *Food crises, food regimes and food movements: rumblings of reform or tides of transformation?*, classifies food movement actors into four categories characterized by their differing approaches

to perpetuating/challenging the corporate food regime: neoliberal (e.g. World Bank, Monsanto), reformist (e.g. UN Food and Agriculture Organization, Slow Food), progressive (e.g. Community Food Security, Coalition of Immokalee Workers) and radical (e.g. Via Campesina). These authors classify RFC as a progressive food movement, understood as challenging the corporate food regime by promoting the right to food, sustainably produced and locally sourced food, and agroecologically-based agricultural development (Holt Giménez and Shattuck 2011). The progressive “trend”, according to Holt Giménez and Shattuck, plays a pivotal role in determining whether the food movement is transformational, or simply reforms the corporate food regime: to the extent that the progressive trend aligns and works with radical groups, the movement will be transformational; to the extent that they align and work with reformist groups, the movement will only reform the corporate food regime, leaving the underlying relationship between capital, state, and nation unchanged (Holt Giménez and Shattuck 2011). With this potential resting with such groups as RFC, further research into their functioning is merited.

The above works explore the ability of social movements to be transformative by analyzing the rhetoric and goals of these movements, while not informing their strategy. As detailed in Shurman and Munro’s 2009 work, *Targeting Capital: A Cultural Economy Approach to Understanding the Efficacy of Two Anti-Genetic Engineering Movements*, the ability of social movements to be transformative is also dependent upon their ability to succeed in achieving their stated goals. In order for social movements to be effective, they argue, actors need to understand and take advantage of, as well as create, openings in political and economic power structures (Shurman and Munro 2009). In today’s neoliberal political environment, many activists have focused on targeting capital, rather than the state, to make change (Shurman and Munro 2009). RFC has targeted capital by adapting their campaigns to focus directly on national food service

providers, as well as by requiring universities to work with less powerful corporations and actors through the commitment. However, RFC also targets the state via their work to effect policy change at universities which, again, can be construed as extensions of state interests. Examination of the decision-making structure of OSU's dining system might reveal opportunities for shifting power into the hands of students, and transforming the interests represented by OSU's food purchasing authorities.

Food movements may also be examined through the diffusion of innovations literature, developed in the 1960s to explain why certain agricultural innovations spread more successfully than others (Rogers 2010). The diffusion of innovations framework identifies barriers to the adoption of an innovation related to the innovation itself as well as related to the potential adopter. By viewing the commitment as an innovation promoted by students, OSU can be considered a potential adopter. In this study, OSU is compared to prior adopters of the commitment to identify possible structural barriers, and critical decision-making nodes within OSU's food purchasing structure are identified in order to evaluate the barriers to and opportunities for adoption presented by the nodes' qualitative characteristics. Through this study, students will be capable of leading a more successful RFC campaign at OSU by understanding the decision-making structure of the university in line with Shurman and Munro's discussion. Additionally, diffusion of innovations literature regarding social movements and institutional change will be deepened.

## **Research Questions**

This research seeks to answer two questions: *(1) How do OSU's structural characteristics (size, location, organization) compare to known institutional adopters of the RFC commitment? (2) Where does decision-making authority for adopting the commitment reside*

*within OSU's food purchasing system?* These questions are explored through secondary analysis of information found online or presented through conversations with OSU administrators, staff, and community members throughout the 2014-2015 school year, through both informal research interviews and on-going discussions in the context of RFC activism.

### **Background: Real Food Challenge and the Campus Commitment**

The Real Food Challenge began as an independent and self-funded program of the Boston based nonprofit “The Food Project”, and was officially founded in 2007 (Real Food Challenge). Students began the organization as a way to connect and strengthen efforts between universities to make a stronger impact on the national food system, and RFC seeks to shift \$1 billion of existing university food budgets away from the dominant corporate-industrial food system and toward what they deem the “real food” system by 2020 (Real Food Challenge). Real food is defined by a thorough set of criteria, ultimately categorized into humane, local/community-based, fair, and ecologically sound, such that an item counts as real if it meets the criteria for any one of these four categories (throughout the paper, “real food” will be used assuming this definition). RFC is also concerned with leadership development, anti-oppression, and power/movement building in youth.

The organization has six core principles guiding their food systems work: 1) the real food principle, encompassing a broad range of food systems issues, 2) the movement principle, recognizing that RFC is one actor in a much broader movement, 3) the youth principle, focusing on young people as drivers of the movement, 4) the partnership principle, emphasizing the need for collaboration between stakeholder groups and varying movement actors, 5) the multi-cultural principle, focusing on dismantling systemic oppression through the food system, and 6) the



participatory principle, striving to include all voices and ensuring that the means of change-making reflect the goals of the ends (Real Food Challenge).

In order to achieve its goals, RFC works with student groups to motivate universities to sign onto the Real Food Campus Commitment (appendix 1). Signing the commitment requires a university/college to commit to five central objectives: 1. Annually increasing real food purchased on campus to meet 20% real food by 2020, 2. Establishing a transparent reporting system using the Real Food Calculator assessment tool and publishing annual progress reports, 3. Forming a food systems working group, composed of 50% students, as well as faculty, staff, dining workers, and community stakeholders, to implement a real food policy and multi-year action plan, 4. Making the food policy, action plan, and progress reports publicly available online, and 5. Increasing awareness about real food on campus (Real Food Challenge). These tenets thus target both capital and the state: capital by shifting the financial resources of the university into alternative food sources, and the state by altering the power structures of decision-making to include students and other groups in policy making, and by establishing transparency between the state and nation.

At OSU, the RFC campaign has been led by a pre-existing student group, Local Matters Student Ambassadors, and began in the summer of 2014. At the time of this writing, negotiation between students and administrators is ongoing.

### **Existing Research: Real Food Challenge**

Research on RFC is limited as the organization as such has existed for only eight years. RFC has been studied as part of a broader social movement, especially in critiques of this movement and in attempts to classify various organization's approaches to movement building,

as discussed above (Barlett 2011, Giménez and Shattuck 2011, Allen 2009), and has been studied through a number of student-led research projects (Meyer 2010, Pajor 2014). This study applies the diffusion of innovations framework to review structural barriers institutional adopters may face, allowing other movement actors and researchers to consider RFC's feasibility and progress more systematically. Additionally, this study explores dynamics of power at OSU, leading to a better informed student movement that can be more impactful in making change on OSU's campus. Ultimately, this study deepens the look at RFC's role in forwarding transformative food movement goals in Columbus and beyond.

### **Theoretical Framework: Diffusion of Innovations**

In order to explore the study's first research question, *how do OSU's structural characteristics (size, location, organization) compare to known institutional adopters of the RFC commitment?*, the diffusion of innovations framework is used to compare OSU to known institutional adopters, seeking to identify barriers to adoption that may stem from structural characteristics of the adopter. The diffusion of innovations framework, developed in the context of agricultural extension and development in the 1960s, explores how, why, and how quickly innovations are diffused—how new ideas or products spread throughout a community or culture (Robinson 2009). An innovation is defined as an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new (Rogers 2010). Adopters of innovations are categorized depending on their rate of adoption as innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards (Rogers 2010). Characteristics of potential adopters, such as wealth, class, and relative autonomy, can all impact likelihood of adoption, and another focus of diffusion of innovations research has been on the characteristics of these differing adopter categories (Rogers 2010).

Innovators are often energized and committed to the innovation without first seeing the demonstration of the success of the innovation (Rogers 2010). They are active information seekers, able to cope with high levels of uncertainty, and are not typically seen as opinion leaders, as they may be thought of as idealists or radicals (Robinson 2009). Early adopters are driven by social prestige and economic gain (Robinson 2009). They have high social status and *are* seen as opinion leaders within their communities (Rogers 2010). In the diffusion of innovations literature, it has been demonstrated that these categories are typically split across a population as follows: 20% innovators/early adopters, 60% early/late majority, and 20% laggards (Robinson 2009). As RFC is in the early phase (first 20% of institutions) of adoption, the first two groups of adopter categories are most relevant to this study (Real Food Challenge). Students at OSU seek to make OSU an early adopter, by becoming the first institution of its kind (size, organization) to sign the commitment.

As the number of schools committing to the Real Food Challenge and the number of students attempting to drive such a commitment grows, examining the dynamics of which schools commit when through the diffusion of innovations framework becomes more useful in order to understand characteristics of schools that are more and less likely to adopt the commitment. The RFC campus commitment can be considered an innovation in that it is a distinct method of purchasing food for an institution in the currently dominant system, and is also distinct from other methods of purchasing alternative (local, sustainable, humane, or ethical) food on campuses.

Another key focus of the diffusion of innovations literature is concerned with peer networks, showing that innovations spread through social networks for both individuals and organizations (Robinson 2009). The more connected a potential adopter is to networks of prior

adopters which share their characteristics, the more likely that entity is to adopt the innovation (Robinson 2009). In Soule's 1996 article about U.S. student activism, she explores how institutions with similar structural characteristics (size, prestige, and location) have high levels of connectivity, which allowed for more successful student movements (Soule 1997). Soule also outlined the importance of a unified student movement across campuses for effective diffusion, such as the organization of RFC (1997). Because similar institutions communicate with each other, and are more likely to adopt innovations that their peers are adopting, identifying institutions which could be considered peers to OSU is also important.

Size, location, and whether an institution is private or public can approximate qualities like class position and risk adversity that have been studied through the diffusion of innovations framework. Public and private schools are both funded primarily by endowment, and there is no significant difference between the two categories in terms of the size of their endowment (NACUBO 2014). OSU, for example, has the 24<sup>th</sup> largest endowment in the country (NACUBO 2014). However, larger schools generally have a lower endowment per capita, suggesting lower levels of wealth and social status, such that the size of an institution may lead it to be less innovative. Public schools additionally receive more state funding and must adhere to the state's interests more fundamentally than private schools, potentially leading them to be less innovative as well (Lombardi 2002). State governments appoint public school governance through an institution's governance board (eg, Board of Trustees), and may reduce funding to universities depending on their adherence to the public agenda (Lombardi 2002). Reliance on state funding may therefore indicate higher risk adversity, limiting innovativeness. Subtler distinctions between different types of public schools, and their location in different states, are also important to this discussion, particularly when examining land grant institutions such as OSU. Historically

in the United States, the Midwest and South have been regions home to extractive industries, including agriculture. Geographers and political economists have long documented how the surplus from these regions has been continually extracted to support growth and wealth on either coast, most significantly the Northeast (Brenner 2002). This suggests that Midwestern and Southern institutions may be less capable of innovation.

In addition to these three institutional characteristics (size, public/private, location), this study includes dining operation as an institutional characteristic that can be seen as influencing the potential for adoption. About 70% of university dining systems are outsourced, meaning they are not self-operated and instead work with a food service provider such as Sodexo (Real Food Challenge). Sodexo, Aramark, and Compass Group (which includes Chartwells and Bon Appétit) make 97% of the revenue of the 50 largest food service companies that work with college dining (Real Food Challenge). RFC has focused campaign efforts on food service companies nationally, including Sodexo, Aramark, Chartwells, and Bon Appétit. For example, Sodexo and Bon Appétit now have transparency agreements whereby students can directly access purchasing invoices from any school they operate, removing a barrier to adoption by allowing students to perform baseline analyses of a school's food sourcing, which has been used as an important tactic to persuade universities to adopt the commitment (Black).

On the other hand, self-operated institutions have increased flexibility to work with vendors already meeting real food criteria, as well as flexibility to work directly with local farmers and food businesses. Goals of challenging corporate hegemony can be forwarded more directly at these institutions, including OSU. Despite RFC's focus on corporately managed dining systems, research has documented that institutions wishing to change their sourcing techniques have often found success in terminating corporate contracts in favor of self-operation

(Barlett 2011). Self-operating dining systems theoretically have greater flexibility to work more directly with farmers, as institutions may be able to require lower levels of insurance and be more flexible with payment and traceability requirements (Barlett 2011). This literature suggests that self-operating universities should be more able to adopt the commitment. Self-operating dining systems may have a greater potential to forward transformative food systems goals by circumnavigating corporate power. At the same time, RFC has focused more campaign resources into targeting that corporate power directly, such that it may be easier for schools working with corporations like Sodexo to adopt the commitment (Schwartz).

Comparing OSU's structural characteristics to known institutional adopters of RFC will offer insight into the likelihood of OSU become an early adopter of RFC, showing the extent to which OSU's peer institutions are adopting and which structural characteristics are most associated with adoption.

### **Theoretical Framework: Exploring Decision-Making Authority in the University**

Examining university governance is necessary to explore the study's second question, *where does decision-making authority for adopting the commitment reside within OSU's food purchasing system?* As discussed above, public universities are governed by a board of directors, a Board of Trustees in the case of OSU, which is composed of individuals appointed by state government (Lombardi 2002). Literature surrounding the governance of universities varies extensively, but most models suggest that public universities are bureaucratically governed, with diffuse power structures ultimately representing the interests of the state, as well as the interests of capital embedded therein (King 2012). As public schools are not homogenous, investigating the governance and power structures of land grant institutions is most applicable for examining OSU.

Land grant institutions, including OSU, were established in 1862 by the Morrill Land Grant Act. The federal government put 17.43 million acres of land up for sale to create academic institutions that would be people's universities, focusing on teaching agriculture, military, and mechanics in addition to the liberal arts so that working class citizens could obtain a practical education (1862 Morrill Land Grant Act). Further legislation in later years gave these schools more resources to focus on agriculture, such as creating agricultural research centers (1887 Hatch Act) and extension services (1914 Smith Lever Act). Land grant institutions have allowed for important agricultural research that has shaped the U.S. food system through the development of higher-yielding varieties of seed, soil conservation methods, and fertilizers and pesticides (Hightower 1972). However, land grant institutions have also had complex impacts on social and economic life in the United States, including deepening social inequalities for women, people of color, and Native Americans, and problematizing rural livelihoods (Hightower 1972).

Since the 1980s, and especially through the passage of the Bayh-Doyle Act of 1982, federal policies have encouraged more partnership between private industry and land grant schools, with private donations providing nearly a quarter of the funding for agricultural research by 2010 (Food and Water Watch 2012). The research initiatives funded and the resulting innovations have frequently been cost prohibitive to small farmers. Indeed, many have directly supported agribusiness through such practices as extension services recommending specific brands of fertilizers, or universities directing patents to donor companies (Hightower 1972). The intersection between the private agricultural industry and land grant institutions also extends to governance, as a revolving door phenomenon occurs between university positions and large agricultural companies (Food and Water Watch 2012).

As governance at public universities is largely managed by the Board of Trustees, and thereby an extension of the interests of state and capital, it is likely that ultimate decision-making authority for policy change within OSU's food purchasing system does not reside with individuals, and is thereby inaccessible to students. However, as adopting the RFC commitment requires only the signature of an institution's President and a "secondary signatory", such as the Vice President of Student Life or the Director of Dining Services, evaluating decision-makers along the path from food purchasing to the President is still essential for understanding the possibility of OSU's adoption of the commitment. By examining OSU's governance structure and identifying and evaluating critical decision-making nodes, further potential barriers to and opportunities for adopting RFC, and making broader food systems change, are illuminated.

Exploration of decision-making authority at OSU is inspired by Shurman and Monro's analysis of global commodity chains, which seeks to assess the concentration of power at any given point along the supply chain. This project focuses on decision-making authority to identify and explore opportunities for RFC movement strategy. In line with the diffusion of innovations framework, the map of decision-making authority constructed for this study may in the future be compared to decision-making structures of prior adopters of RFC to compare and build upon movement strategies across institutions.

## **Methodology**

The majority of research conducted for this study consists of secondary analysis, including compiling information regarding other universities in order to compare institutional adopters of RFC to OSU, compiling and organizing information about the structure of decision-making at OSU, soliciting information from organizers with RFC, and soliciting information from individuals within Dining Services and administrative positions at OSU. Information was



gathered both through explicitly research-oriented conversations and through ongoing movement work. In particular, the analysis of decision-making authority recorded by this study was completed by participating in a movement attempting to navigate and access that authority at OSU.

Much of this research was done while the researcher was actively involved in student organizing and campaign work for RFC. Thus, relationships with those studied and information solicited from them have evolved continuously over the completion of this study. In line with a growing literature of activist and participatory action research, this study seeks to better understand root causes of social issues at OSU, is informed by people who are impacted by these issues, and will be used to inform strategies of a movement directed at reducing them (Hale 2001, Baum 2006). Acknowledging both the strengths and weaknesses of this approach, including more fluid boundaries to research, higher levels of bias and subjectivity, and greater potential to be useful to subjects, this study utilizes participation by other movement actors in addition to the author (Hale 2001, Naples 2003, Nagar 2014).

Participatory action research focuses on research that enables action and includes individuals who are taking, or will take, action. This study was designed to enable students to further their efforts with RFC, and was completed by the researcher in collaboration with the student group. Many student leaders with RFC were involved in this research by informing the construction of the map of decision-making authority that is one outcome of this project. Many more were involved through analyzing the data collected and informing the strategy outcomes reported in this study. Finally, several members of RFC at OSU read this study and provided valuable feedback for reframing the results.

In order to compare OSU's structural characteristics to prior adopters of RFC, characteristics of institutional adopters, including size, location, and organization, were compiled. From these characteristics, OSU's peer institutions are identified, and OSU's characteristics are compared to the most and least common characteristics of adopters, situating OSU's likelihood of becoming an early adopter. Strategy recommendations are offered from this analysis which were developed by the researcher and other students.

The map of decision-making at OSU, though incomplete, was constructed after one year of investigating this structure at OSU through conversations with students and with university employees, in both research-based and campaign-based situations. The researcher met with six OSU staff members between August and November in research-based settings to discuss their role in decision-making. The researcher held multiple meetings with two staff members, and a single meeting with the four others. The researcher and other students participated in meetings with staff and administrators regarding the RFC campaign between January and March, where further information about decision-making structures and strategic opportunities were revealed. In April, the researcher facilitated student discussions around the implications of this research, and the paper was reviewed by two student members of RFC as well as by one national organizer for the organization.

### **Analysis: Comparing OSU to Prior Adopters of the Real Food Campus Commitment**

At the time of writing, thirty institutions have formally adopted the Real Food Challenge Campus Commitment (Real Food Challenge). This list excludes institutions that committed to the challenge prior to the formal establishment of the current Campus Commitment, including the California State University system as a whole, and institutions that are the process of negotiating their level of commitment, such as University of Pittsburgh (Black). In the following

table, each institution is identified by its size, public or private funding, dining operation, and regional location, listed alphabetically. Institutions are considered small if fewer than 3,000 students are enrolled, medium if between 3,000 and 20,000, and large if more than 20,000 students are enrolled (Lounsbury 1996). Location is based on the four regions defined by the United States Census Bureau, which divides states between the Northeast, Midwest, South, and West (US Census Bureau 2010).

**Table 1: Institutional Characteristics of Prior Adopters of the Commitment**

<b>School name</b>	<b>Size</b>	<b>Private Y/N</b>	<b>Operation</b>	<b>Regional location</b>
<i>Ohio State University</i>	<i>Large</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Self-operated</i>	<i>Midwest</i>
College of the Atlantic	Small	Y	Self-operated	Northeast
Bard College	Small	Y	Chartwells	Northeast
University of California – Santa Cruz	Medium	N	Self-operated	West
Clark University	Medium	Y	Sodexo	Northeast
The Colorado Mountain College	Medium	N	Sodexo	West
Cornell College	Small	Y	Bon Appétit	Midwest
The University of Denver	Medium	Y	Sodexo	West
Drew University	Small	Y	Aramark	Northeast
Fort Lewis College	Medium	N	Sodexo	West
The George Washington University	Medium	Y	Sodexo	Northeast
Gonzaga University	Medium	Y	Sodexo	West
The Hotchkiss School	Small	Y	Sodexo	Northeast
Johns Hopkins University	Medium	Y	Bon Appétit	Northeast
Lyndon State College	Small	N	Sodexo	Northeast
Macalester College	Small	Y	Bon Appétit	Midwest
Malboro College	Small	Y	Self-operated	Northeast
University of Massachusetts – Amherst	Large	N	Self-operated	Northeast
McDaniel College	Small	Y	Sodexo	Northeast
Middlebury College	Small	Y	Self-operated	Northeast
University of Montana – Missoula	Medium	N	Self-operated	West
Oberlin College	Small	Y	Bon Appétit	Midwest
Occidental College	Small	Y	Self-operated	West
St. Mary's College, Indiana	Medium	Y	Sodexo	Midwest
Sterling College	Small	Y	Self-operated	Northeast
Stonehill College	Small	Y	Sodexo	Northeast

The University of Utah	Large	N	Chartwells	West
University of Vermont	Medium	N	Sodexo	Northeast
Warren Wilson College	Small	Y	Sodexo	South
Wesleyan University	Medium	Y	Bon Appétit	Northeast
Western State College	Small	N	Sodexo	West

Each characteristic's makeup is summarized below. The most common institutional adopter is small (53%), private (70%), operated by Sodexo (43%), and located in the Northeast (53%). OSU shares none of these characteristics, as it is large (7%), public (30%), self-operated (30%), and located in the Midwest (13%).

**Table 2: Institutional characteristics of prior adopters; OSU's characteristics in italics**

<b>Size</b>	<b>Private Y/N</b>	<b>Dining Operation</b>	<b>Regional Location</b>
Small: 53% (16)	Y: 70% (21)	Sodexo: 43% (13)	Northeast: 53% (16)
Medium: 40% (12)	<i>N: 30% (9)</i>	<i>Self-operated: 30% (9)</i>	West: 30% (9)
<i>Large: 7% (2)</i>		Bon Appétit: 17% (5)	<i>Midwest: 13% (4)</i>
		Chartwells: 7% (2)	South: 3% (1)
		Aramark: 3% (1)	

Institutions sharing at least two of the four characteristics with OSU most closely resemble peer institutions: the University of Utah (large, public), University of California – Santa Cruz (public, self-operated), University of Massachusetts – Amherst (large, public, and self-operated), and University of Montana – Missoula (public, self-operated). Of these institutions, University of Massachusetts – Amherst is most comparable to OSU: sharing three of four characteristics, it is additionally a land grant university. University of Vermont is also a land grant institution, though it shares no other characteristics with OSU. Identifying peer institutions

provides a strategic opportunity for students to facilitate peer-peer communication between OSU and these institutions, particularly University of Massachusetts – Amherst.

OSU holds three of the four least common characteristics as it is large, public, and in the Midwest. Least common characteristics are: large size, public funding, dining operations by Bon Appétit, Chartwells, or Aramark, and location in the South or Midwest. Multiple explanations exist for why RFC has been adopted by institutions sharing these characteristics, including RFC's origins in the Northeast, the stronger culture of activism at liberal arts colleges, and the smaller dining budget of smaller schools. This table shows that many prior adopters of the commitment share similar characteristics, as predicted by diffusion of innovations literature. As OSU does not share the majority of these characteristics, it is suggested that it will be more difficult for OSU to become an early adopter. Each of these characteristics may present unique barriers to adoption; further study is needed to identify these barriers, though possible explanations are explored in this research.

As expressed here, there is low possibility for OSU becoming an early adopter of the RFC commitment. Opportunities to circumnavigate these potential barriers may be explored by examining the decision-making process at OSU. If OSU were to adopt the commitment, how might this occur? The following section examines OSU's decision-making structure to identify which critical nodes have decision-making authority relevant to the potential adoption, then evaluating these nodes to further explore their impacts on the possibility of adoption.

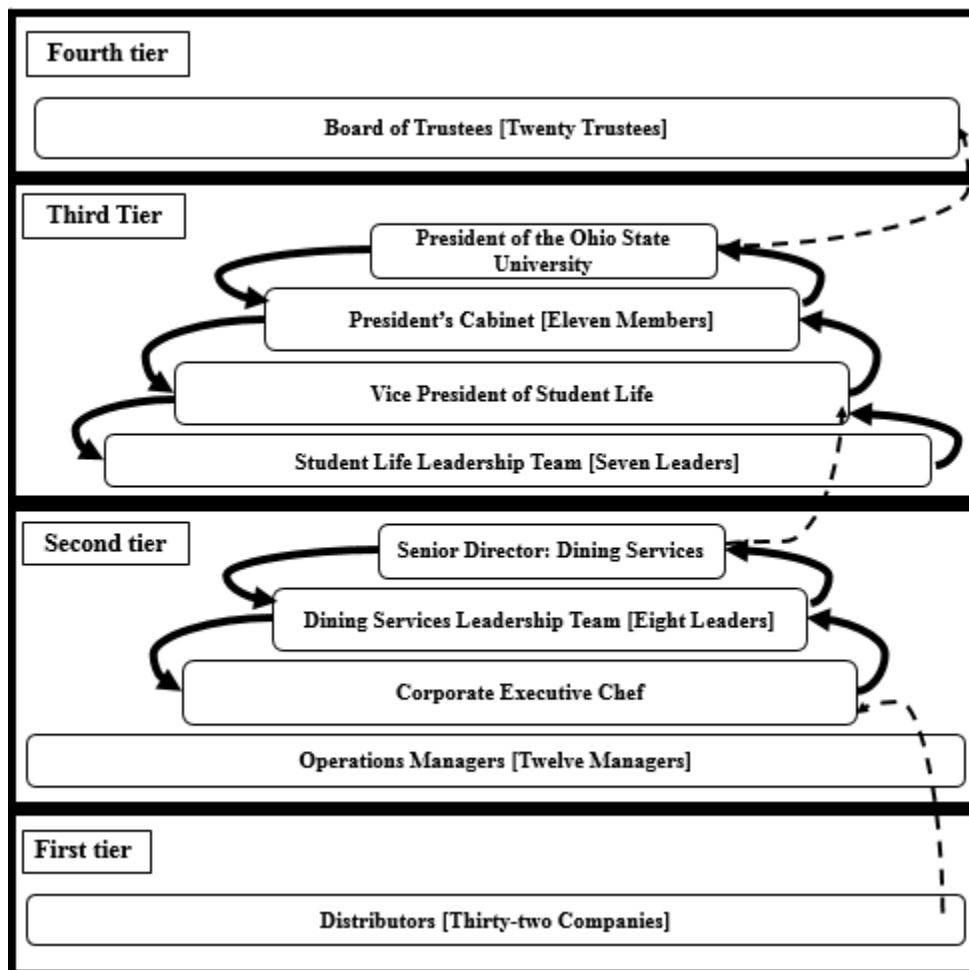
### **Analysis: Decision-Making Authority in OSU's Food Purchasing System**

The RFC commitment must be signed by two individuals: the President of OSU, and a “secondary signatory” to oversee and participate in the implementation of the commitment (Real

Food Challenge). This secondary signatory is often a Vice President or Director of Dining Services, but should be the staff person who will be responsible for overseeing the implementation of the Commitment (Black). If the commitment were adopted by OSU, implementation would require decisions and actions at many levels of OSU's organizational structure, especially through the creation of a food systems working group including individuals from each tier.

There are four tiers of decision-making authority identified by this study. The first tier consists of thirty-two food and beverage distributors which currently sell to OSU. The second tier contains the twelve managers of the twenty-nine dining operations on campus, as well as the Dining Services Leadership Team, which oversees dining more generally by directing policy. The third tier is the Student Life Leadership Team, which oversees Dining Services, and the President's Cabinet, where final decisions about student life are made. Finally, as discussed above, the fourth tier is the Board of Trustees, the ultimate form of governance at OSU. The following diagram outlines this chain of actors, as discovered through solicitations of information of involved actors and through movement work with RFC.

**Figure 1: Decision-Making Authority at OSU**



The President has the power to sign or not sign the commitment. Other individuals listed in the diagram can be the secondary signatory, but cannot sign the commitment without the President. However, each of the above actors can facilitate RFC actions and influence the potential for the President to sign the commitment. Each actor has distinct abilities and limitations for facilitating RFC action, and these are identified in the following discussion and summarized in Table 3 below. The Dining Services Leadership Team, Student Life Leadership Team, and President's Cabinet all share several characteristics: each body's consensus is needed before the recommendation to sign the commitment can be formally forwarded by the critical node to the next level of authority; each body consists of various actors with diffuse interests and

responsibilities, limiting the potential for RFC goals to be forwarded; and more information is needed about these bodies to fully assess their abilities and limitations to support RFC. Similarly, the Corporate Executive Chef, Director of Dining Services, and Vice President of Student Life all are burdened with many responsibilities, and need the consensus of their respective bodies before being able to formally promote RFC to the next level. Unique abilities and limitations are discussed below.

### *First Tier of Decision-Making Authority*

As a self-operated university, OSU works with 32 food and beverage distributors<sup>1</sup>, which make up the first tier of authority for food purchasing at OSU. The majority of food available at OSU (greater than 90%, not including beverages) is purchased from five distributors: US Foods, DNO, Premier Produce One, Northern Haserot, and Blue Ribbon Meats. To achieve the RFC goals of altering the sources of food offered in the dining halls, evaluating the current character of food offered by these distributors, as well as ascertaining their capacity and inclination to provide real food, is necessary. The Corporate Executive Chef (second tier) has facilitated student ability to investigate this.

These distributors are able to incorporate real food directly into the university through producers they already work with. For example, by working with Premier Produce One, the primary produce provider for OSU, students were able to bring local foods to campus for a one-day farmers market event (Fall 2014). Another example is students' direct work with Crimson

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<sup>1</sup> Food and beverage distributors working with OSU, as of April, 2015 (in alphabetical order): Al's Delicious Popcorn, Albert Uster Imports, Appetizers USA, BakeMark USA, Ballreich's Potato Chips, Blue Ribbon Meats, Carbon's Golden Malted, The Coca-Cola Company, Crimson Cup Coffee, DNO Incorporated, Eat Well Distribution, Fresh Serv Produce and Mushrooms, Glazer's of Ohio, Heidelberg Distributing, InHarvest, Instantwhip Foods, Int'l Foods and Ingredients, The Little Donut Shop, Michael's Finer Meats and Seafoods, Nickle's Bakery, Northern Haserot, Orlando Bakery, Premier Produce One, Reiter Dairy, Sammy's Bagels, Spice Barn, Starbucks Corporation, Tedeschi's Italian Bakery, Tim Hortons, US Foods, Velvet Ice Cream, and Vitale Poultry.



Cup Coffee to provide Fair Trade and Organic coffee at campus events. Distributors are also able to increase the amount of real food on campus by working with new producers who meet criteria for real food. For example, the merchandise manager of Premier Produce One has been willing to interface with students and local producers to discuss sourcing from a greater number of local farms. However, most of the distributors working with OSU currently have insurance and traceability policies that are prohibitively expensive or restrictive for small or mid-sized producers, thus limiting the ability for food defined as real to be incorporated.

OSU negotiates a contract with each distributor it works with, which are typically two- or three-year contracts with three one-year extensions. Contracts are established through a bidding process by a committee established on a case-by-case basis, ultimately determined by the highest bidder through a combination of lowest costs, ability to meet supply, and corporate rebates offered. The committee is usually made up of two chefs, three operations managers, and purchasing representatives. Thus, the authority to incorporate new vendors is complex and involves many actors outside of this diagram, especially from the purchasing department.

Working directly with distributors which already have a relationship with OSU allows students to avoid navigating higher tiers of decision-making and to simply improve upon (without transforming) the status quo. Working with distributors to increase their transparency would also allow students to complete valuable research with the Real Food Calculator, potentially forwarding the goals of OSU adopting the commitment in full. In order to bring new distributors into this first tier, the second tier of authority must be involved.

### *Second Tier of Decision-Making Authority*

The second tier of authority consists of the Dining Services Leadership Team<sup>2</sup>, including the Corporate Executive Chef and Senior Director. Also in Dining Services are the operations managers, responsible for handling day-to-day management of all dining operations on campus. Students have had minimal interaction with these individuals, as each request for engagement was rerouted to the Corporate Executive Chef. What foods are purchased from the available distributors is determined directly by the Corporate Executive Chef, meaning she is able to work with distributors to source more real food on campus. In these decisions, the Corporate Executive Chef is highly autonomous. Although she is unable to open new orders without going through the bid process and involving purchasing and other actors, an opportunity for adding new vendors is that the bidding process is not required to open orders under \$25,000. For comparison, the university ordered about \$1.7 million of food from Premier Produce One in 2013-2014. These small orders can be opened by the Corporate Executive Chef as long as there is sufficient reason to do so. Traditionally, these reasons include niche products required for a specific recipe or meeting a particular dietary restriction, such as purchasing soup bases from a company which makes them gluten-free. However, the Corporate Executive Chef has also stated that specific production methods, such as certified organic, could be sufficient reason for opening such an order. This first tier is one opportunity students have successfully navigated to increase the amount of real food on campus. These efforts could be expanded in order to marginally increase procurement with the help of the Corporate Executive Chef.

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<sup>2</sup> The Dining Services Leadership Team consists of the following eight members, in addition to the Senior Director and Corporate Executive Chef: Assistant Director (Nutrition), Assistant Director (Fast Casual Operations), Associate Director (Operations), Assistant Director (Ohio Union Dining), Associate Director (Facilities & Planning), Assistant Director (Traditions), Associate Director (Coffee Cafes, Ohio Union and University Catering), Business Manager.

The Corporate Executive Chef has thus far been supportive of student efforts, and her interest in and support of organic, local, and small-scale agriculture has increased as the year has gone on. She supported students in holding the farmers market event on campus (September 2014), in hosting a listening session with local farmers (March 2015), and collaborated to hold and sponsor a day-long conference surrounding institutional purchasing, at which she also participated in a plenary discussion about the potential impacts of OSU's commitment to RFC (April 2015). Most recently, and in the time since the April conference, the Corporate Executive Chef has been motivated to continue conversation with students about a pilot project of local food purchasing, incorporating broader audiences into the conversation of her own accord.

The Corporate Executive Chef acts as the liaison between students and the larger Dining Services Leadership Team. As such, she was the first individual students were directed to talk with in striving to initiate projects and policy change at OSU. Additionally, she forms the committees that oversee the bidding processes, and works directly with distributors and other campus chefs. Despite this authority, her autonomy is constricted by the necessity of meeting the financial requirements of the university. Recently, she has expressed to students that collaboration with the purchasing department is needed to deeply alter the make-up of food purchased on campus, and students have not yet been successful in initiating contact.

In recognizing the limits to her authority, the Corporate Executive Chef has facilitated a relationship between students and the Senior Director of Dining Services. Like the Corporate Executive Chef, the Senior Director is in part responsible for interfacing with students. Although he has been outwardly supportive of student-initiated projects, he has sought to direct student energy into projects managed by Dining Services, such as their recent establishment of a greenhouse. He has been consistently less supportive than the Corporate Executive Chef. The

Senior Director has authority to direct the Dining Services Leadership Team, as well as to influence the agenda of Student Life through his indirect relationship with the Vice President of Student Life. This relationship has been explored by students in more recent administrative meetings. To date, however, the Senior Director has been unwilling to support students through this relationship.

### *Third Tier of Decision-Making Authority*

The third tier of authority in the OSU food system is made up of the Student Life Leadership Team<sup>3</sup> and President's Cabinet<sup>4</sup>. The two groups are connected by the Vice President of Student Life, who serves in both and has been described as the gatekeeper to the President for students. Her role in the Student Life Leadership Team mirrors the Senior Director of Dining Services: she directs the Team and serves as its ultimate authority. On the President's Cabinet, her position mirrors the Corporate Executive Chef in the Dining Services Leadership Team as she is a member of the team with no specific authority. In her official administrative description, she is responsible for coordinating student organizations as well as campus dining and catering (Board of Trustees, OSU). She represents Student Life to higher administration within the President's Cabinet, and is thus responsible for bringing student concerns to this body, which is responsible for "information sharing and communication and such other roles as the president

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<sup>3</sup>The seven members of the Student Life Leadership Team, not including the Vice President, include: Sr. Associate Vice President for Student Life, Associate Vice President for Student Life, Assistant Vice President for Student Life, Assistant Vice President for Student Life, Assistant Vice President for Student Life, Chief Financial Officer for Student Life, and Associate Vice President for Student Life.

<sup>4</sup> The eleven members of the President's Cabinet, not including the President and the Vice President of Student Life, include: Senior Vice President for Business & Finance and CFO; Senior Vice President and General Counsel; Senior Vice President for Talent, Culture & HR; Senior Vice President for Advancement; Chief of Staff; Vice President for University Communications; Senior Vice President for Administration and Planning; Executive Vice President of Health Sciences and CEO, Wexner Medical Center; Vice President and Athletics Director; Executive Vice President and Provost; Secretary for the Board of Trustees; and Vice President for Research.

shall determine from time to time” (Board of Trustees, OSU). In this way, she appears to act as a vehicle for student power.

The VP of Student Life has the power to steer the Student Life Leadership Team, and to act as a powerful liaison between students and the President’s Cabinet. As such, she is formally presenting the commitment to the Cabinet in their April 27<sup>th</sup> meeting. While the VP of Student Life ensures to students that she would like to help them, she also consistently reiterates her own lack of agency given the pressures from above, that resides with the President and Board of Trustees. While seemingly sympathetic, the VP of Student Life has also challenged students regarding the impacts of the commitment. As the liaison between students and the ultimate decision-making authority of the President, the approval and collaboration of the VP of Student Life appears to be necessary for students to forward the RFC commitment to the President’s office.

Students have not yet been able to interface with the President, although have only recently begun their attempts to do so. As the new President at OSU, Dr. Drake’s reputation is still being formed. Prior to his current position, Dr. Drake was at University of California – Irvine, which is part of the University of California system that made a commitment to RFC that predates the existence of the Real Food Campus Commitment. Dr. Drake also publicly stresses health issues, and mentioned food insecurity in his March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2015 investiture speech. These statements provide an opportunity for students to discuss RFC with him, yet it is unclear whether they signify that he will be more likely to advocate for the commitment. In either case, Dr. Drake is a required signatory of the commitment. The President is “responsible for the entire administration of the university, subject to control of the board of trustees”, such that this type of policy change, concerning significant re-allotment of financial resources, would likely require

approval by the fourth tier, the Board of Trustees (Board of Trustees, OSU). To date, it is unclear whether negotiating with the Board of Trustees will be necessary for students to achieve OSU's adoption of the commitment.

#### *Fourth Tier of Decision-making Authority*

The Board of Trustees at OSU embodies the highest body of governance, including overseeing the actions of the President. The Board of Trustees is composed of fifteen voting members appointed by the governor of Ohio, two non-voting student members elected by the Board, and three non-voting charter members elected by the Board (Board of Trustees, OSU). Each member of the Board of Trustees has an influential role in the Columbus community and is connected to business and finance, including a number of Fortune 100 companies (Board of Trustees, OSU). A few examples of other involvements of the Board of Trustees members include: Managing Partner, North America, of the international law firm of Squire Patton Boggs; Director of the J.M. Smucker Company and CyrusOne Inc.; President of The Limited Brands Foundation Board; President and CEO of Battelle Memorial Institute; retired C.E.O. of Nationwide Insurance; board member for Con Agra Foods; Bob Evans Farms Board of Directors; and former President of the Ohio Farm Bureau Federation (Board of Trustees, OSU). The explicit ties to industry echo the state's ties to capital interests, as the university represents capital interests in its highest form of governance. Trustee opinions regarding RFC may be shaded by their ties to capital and their perception of how adopting the commitment may impact their capital interests. While this is a potential impediment, it also provides an opportunity for students to frame RFC as beneficial to these types of capital interests, such as local corporations who may be able to benefit. While this may be in contradiction to movement goals, it may provide an opportunity to adopt the commitment, thus ultimately forwarding these goals. This

level of authority has been entirely inaccessible to students thus far, though the opportunity may exist for students to present a proposal for RFC to the Board in their next meeting, June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

### *Decision-Making Authority Conclusions*

**Table 3: Decision-Making Authority Summary**

<b>Actor (tier)</b>	<b>Ability to facilitate RFC actions</b>	<b>Limitations to facilitating RFC actions</b>
Distributors (first)	Work with different producers to bring real food to OSU; improve transparency for student research	Prohibitive insurance/traceability policies
Corporate Executive Chef (second)	Work with distributors to bring real food to OSU; bringing on new vendors (<\$25,000); liaison between students and DSLT; forms committees for bidding process	Needs purchasing involvement for new contracts; needs DSLT consensus for policy impact; must balance student interest against other responsibilities; must meet financial bottom lines
Senior Director of Dining Services (second)	Steers DS Leadership Team; liaison to Student Life	Must balance student interest against other responsibilities and interests; responsible for DS to higher authorities
Vice President of Student Life (third)	Steers SL Leadership Team; liaison to President's Cabinet	Must balance student interest against other responsibilities and interests; responsible for SL to higher authorities; limited role in President's Cabinet
President of the Ohio State University (third)	Ability to sign commitment	Must balance student interest against other responsibilities and interests; subject to control of Board of Trustees
Board of Trustees (fourth)	Oversee university governance, including President	Ties to capital, more info needed

Each of the critical decision-making nodes evaluated above is a public figure. They are meant to meet with students and to be seen as leaders, but are perhaps not as powerful as they appear. One obvious demonstration is the number of other actors with equivalent power on the above diagram: other members of Dining Services' and Student Life's Leadership Teams, and other members of the President's Cabinet. Perhaps these individuals are less directly involved in working with students or with food policy changes, but their influence in final decision-making

is demonstrated through the necessity of consensus among each of these groups. Exploring the specific roles of each of these individuals may reveal further barriers and opportunities for forwarding the adoption of the commitment, and students should begin exploring these roles. Another entity not engaged with students despite the necessity of their approval for such a policy change is the purchasing department. The purchasing department has control over the bidding process, as well as opening and negotiating contracts with food distributors, yet they have not been in conversation with students hoping to change these contracts.

Ultimately, in order to adopt the RFC commitment, students need the President's approval and signature. The easiest way to formally negotiate with him is through the support of the VP of Student Life. To date, it is unclear whether that support is accessible without the support of the Senior Director of Dining Services and his Leadership Team, though in theory it would be possible. Students are advised to be attentive to each of the above critical nodes, with emphasis on the Vice President of Student Life and the President of OSU.

As shown here, policy change is difficult to achieve through the diffuse power structure of OSU. However, making small shifts to more real food sources without policy change may not be difficult for students to achieve, as the power to do so is concentrated, accessible, and sympathetic in the form of the Corporate Executive Chef. Students are recommended to continue efforts to shift to more real food sources through this avenue, while simultaneously negotiating with higher authorities in an attempt for OSU to adopt the commitment.

## **Conclusions**

Through examining critical decision-makers of OSU's food purchasing system, questions regarding the efficacy of RFC as a strategy for food system change are raised. If students' goals



are solely to shift food purchasing, collaboration with distributors, the Corporate Executive Chef, and Dining Services may be the fastest and easiest method. Assuming students are interested in all tenets of the Real Food Campus Commitment, including establishing a transparent reporting system, implementing a food systems working group to give students a permanent voice in policy making, and having students evaluate the impacts of food purchasing through the Real Food Calculator, policy change is necessary. To achieve said policy change, students must navigate this power structure, negotiating each level. Should students fail to achieve the commitment signature, change is still possible through other, less transformative avenues. Students are urged to further efforts to implement the commitment so that efforts for food system change focus not solely on capital by shifting the market, but also the state by shifting the way decisions are made on campus.

Revisiting the food systems issues student activists seek to address through the Real Food Challenge, it is important to consider whether the impacts of OSU committing to RFC would forward these movement goals. RFC is constructed as a challenge to today's corporate food regime, seeking to disrupt power structures on campus and beyond by placing more power in the hands of students and by shifting financial resources away from transnational corporations. However, as shown through this study, this can only be achieved through navigation of and collaboration with the power structures currently in place, raising further questions about the level of transformation possible. Achieving the RFC commitment would restructure decision-making by creating a food systems working group, including students, responsible for devising food policy, and by increasing transparency on campus.

For students to build an effective movement at OSU, students must balance their ability to challenge these power structures with the necessity of engaging with each tier of authority. By

demonstrating feasibility through collaboration with Dining Services, as has already begun, students can maintain positive working relationships with those in power while achieving incremental change. This process, rather than distract or appease students, must be accompanied by building and demonstrating broad-based student, faculty, staff, and community support for policy change. Pressure need not be sustained on all levels of authority, as those below the third tier have minimal say in the ultimate decision. Collaboration and incremental change should continue among the bottom two tiers, while student power and community support should be targeted at the top two tiers, specifically through President Drake and the Board of Trustees. Student activists are advised to begin engaging with power structures not yet explored, such as exist in the purchasing department, Board of Trustees, and membership of the President's Cabinet and Student Life's and Dining Services' Leadership Teams. Student researchers are advised to extend their exploration of these authority structures as the structure delineated above offers only one of many paths to the President's office.

Further research is also needed to identify and evaluate further barriers to adopting the RFC commitment inherent in various institutions' structures, and to complete further case studies of institutions facing challenges distinct from those at a Midwestern land grant with a self-operated dining system, including deepening comparison studies between schools. Students are also recommended to facilitate direct conversation between authority figures at OSU with those from peer institutions, especially University of Massachusetts – Amherst. Further coordination between students at OSU and students forwarding RFC campaigns at other peer institutions, especially those in the Big10 conference, is also recommended. Future research could be conducted to compare the decision-making structure revealed at OSU to decision-making structures at prior adopting schools to further the diffusion of innovations examination of RFC.

Additionally, network analysis could be used to explore the peer networks not only of universities, but of the individuals who make up these decision-making structures. Following these recommendations, students will have a greater likelihood of successfully forwarding their RFC campaign at OSU. Should OSU adopt the RFC commitment, the transformative potential of the organization will be deepened and alternative food movement goals forwarded.

While this study focuses on adopting the RFC commitment at OSU specifically, the results of this study are transferrable in that students at other schools are urged to follow the process detailed above to build decision-making maps on their home campuses which can then be compared to identify which schools' decision-making structures are better suited for adopting the RFC commitment. Further, the table of adopters can be expanded as more institutions commit to RFC, allowing for movement actors to strengthen networks between institutions and for organizers to identify schools which may be a good fit for adopting RFC.

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## Appendix 1: Real Food Campus Commitment



### Real Food Campus Commitment

We, the undersigned representatives of \_\_\_\_\_, are committed to improving our nation's food system to prevent adverse health, social, economic and ecological outcomes.

We believe colleges and universities must exercise leadership in our communities and throughout society by modeling ways to support ecologically sustainable, humane and socially equitable food systems.

We further recognize that investing in the use of local/regional, ecologically sustainable, humane and fair foods benefits not only the daily lives of current students, but the recruitment and retention of new students; fosters university-community relations by supporting the livelihoods of family farmers and food chain workers; and places our institution in alignment with leading colleges and universities across the country.

Accordingly, we commit our institution to taking the following steps in pursuit of 'real food' on campus:

1. Commit to annually increasing procurement of 'real food'—defined as local/community-based, fair, ecologically sound, and/or humane by the *Real Food Calculator*—so as to meet or exceed 20% of food purchases by 2020
2. Commit to establishing a transparent reporting system, including the *Real Food Calculator*, to assess food procurement and commit to compiling these assessment results in an *annual progress report*
3. Commit to forming a *food systems working group* (comprised of students, staff, faculty, food service managers, food service workers and relevant local stakeholders) responsible for developing and coordinating the implementation of an official *real food policy* and *multi-year action plan*
4. Commit to making the *real food policy*, *multi-year action plan* and *annual progress reports* publicly available online and through the Real Food Challenge
5. Commit to increasing awareness about ecologically sustainable, humane and socially equitable food systems on campus through co-curricular activities, cafeteria-based education and other appropriate means

Upon signing the Commitment, we further commit to the following tasks:

1. Within 1 month, complete the *Baseline Campus Food Survey*
2. Within 3 months, confirm with relevant parties that all contracts with distributors, food service providers and on-campus vendors will be amended in future RFP or renewal processes to align with the new *real food policy* and *multi-year action plan*
3. Within 6 months, initiate a student-led assessment of campus food procurement using the *Real Food Calculator*
4. Within 12 months, adopt a comprehensive *real food policy* and begin executing a *multi-year action plan* with annual benchmarks
5. Within 12 months, produce one substantive communications piece covering the ongoing Real Food Commitment efforts

In recognition of the need to build support for this effort among college and university administrators across the United States, we will encourage our colleagues at peer institutions to join this effort and adopt the Real Food Campus Commitment.

Signed,

\_\_\_\_\_  
President / Chancellor Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Secondary Signatory Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Title

\_\_\_\_\_  
Title

\_\_\_\_\_  
Partner Student Organization(s)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date